

Setting Sun or New Dawn: What now for Taiwan?

This blog post was first posted to the International Centre for Security Analysis blog on the 28th January 2016.

Tsai Ing-wen's election as President of the Republic of China is an indication that the people of the country known to most people as Taiwan want a change of direction from their leaders. From being defeated by the incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou four years ago, Tsai has now been elected with a sizeable majority, having received 56% of the vote, with her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) also taking control of the Legislative Yuan. While this clearly demonstrates a new trajectory for the island nation, it remains to be seen what the consequences of this election result and long-term effects for relations in the region will be.

A key feature of the election campaign was how the result would affect Taiwan's relationship with Mainland China. The [results of a poll](#) conducted by National Chengchi University's Election Study Center in July 2015 showed that only 9.1% of respondents supported unification with China, and that just 3.3% regarded themselves as Chinese. 21.1% of people supported independence, although it should be noted that this is lower than the 23.9% supporting independence in 2014. In her [first speech](#) following the result, Tsai said that the people of Taiwan expected 'a government that is steadfast in protecting this country's sovereignty'. Although the Kuomintang lost a great number of votes, especially due to Taiwan's stagnating economy and the dissatisfaction with the incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou, it is apparent that many people in Taiwan do not wish to have closer relations with China, which translated into votes for Tsai and the DPP.

China's response to Tsai's election is in keeping with its pre-election stance: neither overtly supportive nor aggressive. According to Chinese news agency *Xinhua*, China's Taiwan Affairs Office [released](#) a statement on 16th January saying that China's policies towards Taiwan would not change on account of the election result. As such, China looks to maintain the 1992 Consensus - the acknowledgement that there is 'One China' -

though both sides disagree about which of the existing 'Chinas' is the 'One China'. The *Global Times*, a Chinese tabloid published by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, [is quoted](#) as saying 'We hope Tsai can lead the DPP out of the hallucinations of Taiwan independence, and contribute to the peaceful and common development between Taiwan and the mainland'. Interestingly, this does not mention a unification of the two countries, but implies that the closer links forged by the incumbent Taiwanese President Ma, which culminated in a historic meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in November, will be maintained.

The election result is also likely to affect relations with Taiwan's other major ally: the United States. Although America appears to be upholding its current obligations to the island nation, the extent and sincerity of this support can be called into question; especially in defense cooperation. America supplies Taiwan with arms of a defensive nature under the Taiwan Relations Act, and December 2015 [saw the most recent arms deal](#) between the two countries; worth US\$1.83 billion. Although was the first arms deal between the two countries since 2011, and included Perry-class frigates, amphibious assault vehicles and anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles, it contained neither upgrades/replacements for Taiwan's F-16s, nor the diesel-electric submarines for which Taiwan has long been asking. While this is evidence of continued cooperation between the two countries, this deal does seem to be somewhat piecemeal in nature. Additionally, the deal antagonised the Chinese leadership even in spite of its limited nature; something that US President Barack Obama is [keen to avoid](#) during its last year in office. However, Republican Presidential nominee Marco Rubio has been vocal in his support of Taiwan against China, and given the [comments about China made by other Republican hopefuls](#), the future of the region might well be an important, if unglamorous and [potentially side-lined issue](#) in the forthcoming US Presidential election.

So what will the coming months and years hold for Taiwan? The principal challenge for Tsai is that in so many affairs, Taiwan is inextricably linked to China. This means that any attempts at improving the economy and setting Taiwan on a more independent footing will be difficult. Any overt, brash, or reckless shift from the status quo in terms

of Taiwan's independence would likely to result in vocal criticism from China, which sees the island very firmly as being in its sphere of influence. Although Taiwan has a reasonably strong military, its lack of a seat at the United Nations and the massive military and economic strengths of China and America will limit its ability to control the direction it takes.

Therefore, it is highly likely that Taiwan will remain in the shadow of China for the foreseeable future, and will exist in America as an issue to be considered when formulating policy towards China; on both sides of the debate. Tsai Ing-wen may have been elected on the promise of improving Taiwan and bringing a new dawn for the country; however, the reality for the people of Taiwan is that this election might just be a false dawn.